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# THE RUSSIAN'S IMMENSE INERTIA

BY CHARLES JOHNSTON

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When I wrote concerning Russia a month ago, the newspapers were seething with "the Korniloff Rebellion." We were understood to be on the eve of an immense tragedy, from which would emerge either a Napoleonic dictatorship or a welter of anarchy. The situation seemed to be pregnant with tremendous possibilities.

Well, the month has passed, and, from the frightful thunder-cloud there has emerged—nothing. The whole business was a misconception. It would seem now that there never was any Korniloff rebellion, that Korniloff never intended to rebel, that he never even stirred from his headquarters at Mogilev. A band of fur-capped Caucasian horsemen, the so-called Dikaya Divisia, or "wild Division," rode towards Petrograd and—got railroad tickets to the Caucasus, and there it ended. The whole thing was based on a bungling of messages by a certain Vladimir Lvoff.

Then came wild stories of an uprising of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie (which our newspapers in general called the "bourgeoise," as though some stout, middle-aged lady had been in peril); the people, the masses, were going to seize all power, and do all kinds of rigorous things to the capitalistic classes. Again there has resulted—nothing.

Meditating upon this curiously perplexing and exasperating situation, it occurred to me that here was, perhaps, the clear emergence of a fundamental symptom; with the further thought that we were very probably confusing ourselves endlessly about Russia, by imagining that Russians are on the whole people like ourselves, who will act as we should act; while, in reality, they may be quite different from ourselves in the fundamental springs of their nature.

Then it occurred to me to ask this question: Aside from the soul-harrowing cablegrams, what has actually happened

in Russia, in the seven or eight months since the Emperor's abdication on the Ides of March? There has been some street-fighting in Petrograd, perhaps as much as there used to be in the "flush times" of Nevada or California, a half century back; perhaps a little more than there was the other day in Philadelphia, when some one had the idea of importing "gunmen," to give a touch of medievalism to the primaries. There has been a forward movement, followed by two or three backward movements, along the thousand miles of battle front; there has been some stir among the alien nationalities. And that is all. Free Russia, in seven or eight months, has done—nothing. No government has been worked out; practically nothing has taken place.

Then it seemed to me that the word of the enigma was Russia's immense inertia; the infinite capacity for sitting still and doing nothing. And I began to apply this key to the various situations throughout Russia, in detail.

Take the army, to begin with. In spite of all Kerensky's urgings, it has obstinately refused to move forward, to undertake a strong and resolute offensive. It is evident now that the one positive action in these seven or eight months, Korniloff's drive up to the Carpathian foothills, was simply an expression of the inertia of the old imperial army; Brusiloff had wound these troops up to move in a certain direction, and they carried out that movement, till the spring ran down. Then came reaction and retreat, leaving them practically where they were before the fine offensive of June, 1916. They had simply settled back again into their old trench, their old rut, and there they stopped.

For, if there has been no great forward movement, there has been no great backward movement either. Riga was made ready for evacuation as much as two years ago; all along, it has simply been a question of a little pressure. The pressure was put on this summer and the Russian line was pushed back beyond Riga—and there it stayed. On the whole, the military movements, from a strategic point of view, during these seven or eight months, have amounted to practically nothing. The Russian troops are sitting in their trenches, and there, apparently, they will continue to sit. Why, from their point of view, should they move?

One may say practically the same thing about all the political Congresses assembled at Petrograd, each proclaiming itself the representative of the whole Russian people.

I must confess myself deeply sceptical as to their representative character. It is not so easy to get together a Congress genuinely representing a nation of not far from two hundred million people, scattered over eight millions of square miles, stretching round the Eastern hemisphere. We have been told remarkably little about the election machinery used to secure this genuine representation, or how it was so ably extemporized. If it be possible thus to gather representatives of all Russia every few weeks, why is the Constituent Assembly so long in coming? Why do the wheels of its chariot tarry?

It appears, however, that the plans for the Constituent Assembly are making some progress. The electoral districts have, we are told, been marked out. They number 730. This will mean one electoral district for each 225,000 to 250,000 population, about the same as our House of Representatives. The cables have mentioned, among others, Petrograd, Moscow and Kiev, with 20, 19 and 21 electoral districts; but it is not clear whether the cities or the *gubernias* (the provinces, or, as we might call them, the States) are meant. Probably it is the *gubernias*. The populations in 1913 were:

	<i>City</i>	<i>Gubernia, including City</i>
Petrograd .....	2,133,100	3,136,500 (20 electoral districts)
Moscow.....	1,817,100	3,591,800 (19 " " )
Kiev .....	626,313	4,792,500 (21 " " )

The army on the Western front is divided into six electoral districts; the fleet into two, the Baltic and the Black Sea. But full details are likely to be available by November.

These Congresses have had far more the air of something we are not unacquainted with in this country: Conventions of "hand-picked" delegates, who gather to give a parrot-like assent to cut-and-dried propositions, and not to give expression to genuine views of their own; often, perhaps, because they have no genuine views of their own. The voting at the so-called "Democratic Congress" held in Petrograd at the beginning of October, if the cables gave anything like a true account of it, seemed to indicate pretty clearly that the voters had not the slightest idea what they were doing, or what their votes meant.

Keeping these things in mind, one tries to form a mental picture of the genuine Russia, the Russian people, as a homogeneous mass. European Russia covers about 1,800,000

square miles. Over this vast hill-less plain, from the birches of the north to the flowered plains of the south, there dwell some hundred million peasants of Slav stock, speaking practically the same tongue, or dialects easily intelligible to each other. They are grouped in villages, generally of thatched log huts, villages whose streets are simply ruts of mud or trails of dust. Of these villages, there are some 700,000 with about a hundred inhabitants each, say, fifteen to twenty families; then there are a certain number of larger villages, to keep up the average. But the village of fifteen or twenty log homesteads is overwhelmingly the type; there are nearly three-quarters of a million of them.

Each of these villages has, perhaps, two or three square miles of land, much of it still held under age-old communal tenures; and the periodical dividing of this land, forest, pasture, among the fifteen or twenty homesteads, constitutes a major part—a very serious and contentious part—of the village business. The householders—for the house, not the person, is the basis of suffrage—elect an “old man,” a *Starosta*, to run things, which he does, in consultation with the assembled householders, in a highly patriarchal way, with much eloquence. There are questions of slightly wider scope, concerning groups of villages, which are threshed out at inter-village meetings, that in their turn elect an “old man,” a *Volostnoi Starshina*.

These innumerable villagers in their log houses thatched with straw are, in one sense, the “Russian people.” If everything else and everyone else were taken out of Russia and a Chinese wall were built along the present battle-line, the hundred million peasants might go on just as usual; in all likelihood they would go on just as usual, till Gabriel’s trumpet sounded startlingly above their village Mir. Then they would vote an adjournment and depart with Gabriel.

The cables have rung with the words “proletariat” and “bourgeoisie,” since the Ides of March. Applied to Russia, both words are quite absurd. The word “proletariat” was invented, I think, by Sulla, for purposes of agitation, and meant persons who had children—and nothing else. A bourgeois is a burgess, the inhabitant of a town, with certain privileges.

But, while the Russian villagers have children, and plenty of them, having, indeed, by far the largest birthrate in Europe, from 40 to 45 births per thousand each year, they

are far from having nothing else. They have, to begin with, their houses, exactly the kind of house that suits them best; they have their stock, their farming implements; they have their exasperating, tangled, undivided shares in some two or three square miles of forest and arable land and pasture. They belong, therefore, the whole hundred million of them, to "the capitalistic class"!

As against these hundred million peasants, there are, in European Russia, some 20,000,000 city dwellers, one-tenth of whom are in Petrograd, and something under another tenth in Moscow; Kiev and Odessa have about 600,000 each, while Riga has 500,000. No other Russian city has as many as a quarter million inhabitants; only a score have as many as 100,000.

There were, before the war, two or three million factory hands and miners; two per cent, perhaps, of the whole population. And these, if you wish, are the genuine proletariat, for whom it is now claimed that they are the authentic "Russian people," that they have the right to rule all Russia.

One sees at once into what confusion our thinking about Russia has been thrown by the noisy doings at Petrograd, by truculent persons like "Nikolai Lenin" and Trotsky. The real Lenin, it is said, died several years ago in Switzerland; the genuine name of the present wearer of the title is said to be Zederblum, which seems to mean "Cedar-blossom," evidently not a Slavonic name. He comes, without doubt, from the same class which has bestowed upon us Miss Emma Goldman and Mr. Alexander Berkman, and is made of the same psychological material.

And, if one ponders over it, there is a genuine pathos in the existence of this class. They have enormous nervous energy, without constructive power. Therefore they are almost predestined agitators. They have no genuine sense of nationality, nor do they really understand the character and aspirations of the peoples among whom they dwell. When they come here as immigrants, they settle in the tenement districts of our cities, and find their way, for the most part, into sweat-shops rapaciously run by people of their own class, who arrived a few years earlier and have amassed a little capital. In these sweat-shops they form their ideas concerning the hollowness of "American civilization." Thousands of them have streamed back to Petrograd since the Ides of March, to denounce us and our capitalistic ways.

The curious thing about them, and the tragical thing, is, that they so often have idealism without spirituality, the ardent longing for an earthly paradise, which could be realized, generally, by the possession of more money; but there is a certain imaginative humanism in their ideas, though it is generally of the earth, earthy; and their high psychical tension makes them ferocious in denunciation. A certain bitter zeal is the key note of their temperament.

These are the people who have been raising the storm in Petrograd, with the large and eager aid of German agents, whose persuasive ways are being set forth with such fine tact and irony by our own State Department. Their kind has been not less busy in Petrograd.

So we have two of the elements in contemporary Russian history: the hundred million peasants whose spiritual horizon is bounded by their villages, strewn, like the stars in their multitude, over the vast Russian plain; and the Zederblum agitators, with their high tension psychic ferocity, mouthing Marxian dogmas about the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, which have practically no applicability at all to the real conditions of Russian life—conditions about which they seem to be comprehensively in the dark. Then there are the two or three million factory hands and miners and metal workers, with whom the Zederblum agitators seem to have had some temporary success. Indeed, they seem to have succeeded too well, inspiring the operatives to ask for something above the entire profits of the factories. At that rate, things cannot run very long.

So we come back to vast rural Russia, the hundred million peasants in their villages. These people seem to have no great political gifts. Perhaps their communal land tenure has checked the growth of individuality among them; or perhaps it simply expresses the absence of marked individuality, and of the demands of individuality. Tolstoi in certain ways expresses the heart of their mystery with profound truth. They are religious by instinct and habit, they are gentle and good natured and melancholy, they are passive, full of profound inertia; they are, in a sense, anarchistic; that is, they have no inherent instinct for a general, national government; their affairs would go on pretty well if there was no government at all beyond the patriarchal Mir, which decides the moot questions of their villages and *volosts*.

They have never evolved a government of their own. Eleven or twelve centuries ago, they had worked themselves into much the kind of muddle that prevails in Russia today. They were entirely unable to get out of it. So they sent this message to Viking Rurik and his brethren: "Our land is big and abounding, but there is no order in it; come and rule us and be princes over us!" So Rurik came and established a dynasty, as another prince of Viking stock came later to England to found a dynasty there. Viking blood in Russia, like Norman blood in England, was the basis of the old noblesse. And it was the descendants and successors of these Norman nobles who, at Runnymede, laid the foundations of constitutional government in the Great Charter. Until the nineteenth century, the proletariat had little to do with constitution making in England; the House of Commons was developed by the landed gentry and the burgesses.

The Russian noblesse had less of political instinct, therefore more power remained in the hands of the dynasty. And when, in the time of Shakespeare, the old dynasty of Rurik died out with Feodor, John the Terrible's son, Russia fell once more into a "time of confusion," whose tragedy was deepened by Polish invasions. It was in the midst of this "time of confusion" that Russia called the Romanoffs to power, persuaded by their patriotic service, and, for three centuries, the Russian realm and the Romanoffs grew together, the Czar becoming a part of the peasants' religion.

How far that religious feeling rested on sheer passive acceptance, the peasant taking the Czar as he took the vast sky over his head, or the interminable plain in which he lived, or the gloomy pine forests about him, accepting them all with his measureless inertia, would be a question fascinating to study, but difficult to solve conclusively. But, at the Czar's bidding, he sent his sons to the war; at the Czar's bidding, he paid the taxes that kept the machine of state going. Throughout the army, on the whole, was the spirit of sacrifice, the readiness to "die for the Czar." That was the mainspring of the Russian army. Pressed forward by that mainspring, the Russian peasant, in his own nature passive and pacifist, fought hard and died heroically.

And now the mainspring is broken. We saw that, if we lifted out of Russia everything except the innumerable villages, the vast mass of the Russian people would remain



practically unchanged, the horizon of each group of villagers bounded by their village. Well, that is about what has happened. The vast framework, of which the Czar was the center, has been lifted off, and the innumerable villagers remain. If left to themselves, they would simply go on tilling their land till the end of time. So far as they are concerned, the noisy persons at Petrograd can effect practically nothing. They can, perhaps, take land from the richer landowners, who will in all likelihood not resist—that is a part of Russian inertia—and give it to the peasants. But if they reverse the process, and try to take land from the peasant, instead of giving land to him, they will find themselves trying to move the vast mountain weight of inertia of the whole Russian people.

The mainspring is broken too, so far as the army is concerned. The Russian soldier could understand “dying for the Czar;” that was born in the bone of him, and in his power to suffer he was a hero. But when you take away from him the inspiration of his loyalty, and substitute for it self-interest, then self-interest instantly says, “Why should I die at all? Why not save my own skin?” And all the profound passivism and pacifism in his nature, out of which his loyalty to the Czar had partly dragged him, echoes the plaintive cry, “Why should I die at all?” So he settles back doggedly into his trench, and there he will sit, held by his immense inertia, so long as the enemy shell fire is not too galling. And, if his officers try too hard to make him fight, and call him a coward, he will sulk awhile in silence; then, if they persist, stirring him up to undesired activity, he will shoot them, and settle back into his trench once more.

This is, I think, a vital truth concerning the Russian nature; the nature of the real Russians of the innumerable villages, not the melodramatists of Petrograd. It is not the whole truth; it may even be an exaggeration of one side of the truth. But I am convinced that there is a profound reality here; and that, so long as we do not take it into consideration, we shall quite fail to understand Russia.

CHARLES JOHNSTON.